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THE TEACHING OF ELEMENTARY ECONOMICS

ROUND TABLE CONFERENCE

The conference Wednesday afternoon, December 29, was largely attended by an interested gathering. At that session remarks were contributed only by announced speakers. At the smaller adjourned meeting next day, there was a prepared contribution and brief general discussion as well. The view was expressed after the conference that the subject had been only opened up, and that the conference should be continued another year. The following is an epitome of the stenographic minutes, prepared by the Chairman, D. T. Clark, Williams College.

Professor Burbank, Harvard, answering the question raised by the Chairman, why the teaching of economics has had so little influence upon public life, said that the main reason was because the teaching in general is pretty poor, and that it is pretty poor because we have not defined our aims. Too frequently we undertake to give a course in economics by choosing a text-book, and perhaps a book of selected readings, and by then simply attempting to cover the book and the readings, with no aim beyond that.

The aim should be two-fold, to give both a rigid training in theory and a comprehensive survey of fact. The time-honored aims are not to be put upon the shelf; the first subject which was emphasized when economics became a subject for collegiate study was disciplinary in character; the elementary course should give definite training that will lead to independent, logical reasoning regarding economic phenomena. But our aims should go beyond that; we should aim also to give our students a clear survey, as nearly as possible, of the existing economic organization. The course should be not only disciplinary in character, but factual as well, and at its end the student should be able to handle economic phenomena without prejudice, and have a clear and comprehensive view of the existing economic system. Clearly to establish this aim and then to attempt to accomplish it would raise our standard of teaching very much, and give our students far more than they are getting.

This cannot be done in a half-course. The half-course is perhaps a waste of the money of the university. With the full course we can approach, but not realize, the accomplishment of our aims. Reckoning that at most we can call upon the students for six hours per week of outside reading or outside work (and it is only with a few students that we can get that amount of application), and adding three hours a week in the class-room, we are given a very small amount of time in which to accomplish anything like the ambitious aims mentioned. We cannot give a thorough, rigid training in economics—both principles and facts—until we increase the time of the work on both that goes into the elementary course. At the present time, large numbers of our men are leaving that course, who will not take any further work in that field, and who have no grasp of the principles involved in the subject, and no comprehension of the economic system under which we are living. If we could meet for recitation work four or five times a week throughout the year we could accomplish something worth while. A partial solution would be to raise the standard and practically require that the students, in order to stay in the course, must put in four, or five, or six hours of outside work each week. Another possibility is to give an intro-

ductory course, introductory to the proper course, which will be largely social and factual in character, and will deal somewhat with economic history and somewhat with economic geography and organization and control.

As to the best size of recitation classes, perhaps twenty men to a section is "ideal," though it is seldom realized in this day of very large classes. In a small section there are some very decided advantages. The instructor has the opportunity of eliminating very quickly the unfit; of paying more attention, if he so desires, to the able men, or distributing his time to all. At Harvard the "A" men are segregated and put into a separate section early in the year, which makes it possible to give them undivided attention. This improves the teaching in the other sections, as the instructor then need not go over the heads of the students of less capacity.

Professor Burbank then took up the question whether it is the function of the instructor to express his own views, or whether he is simply before his class to teach them to reason, and to present different questions of fact and different sides of the doctrine which is being studied. He said that it is a better policy for the instructor to keep his own views to himself for the most part; occasionally it is advantageous to bring them in. There is a great deal of danger of the instructor's becoming a propagandist of one sort or another if he is constantly expressing his own opinions. The student wants such an expression, but it is not necessary to yield in order to stimulate the interest of the students. In fact, we do not need to be concerned particularly to stimulate the interest at the present time; the very increase of numbers of students is a sufficient index of the interest taken.

Finally, referring to the point of view from which the course should be approached, Professor Burbank said he thought that Professor Fisher expressed the proper attitude in the preface to his book, where he intimates that until a student knows the physical structures he should not concern himself with any remedies.

Professor Agger, Columbia, continuing the consideration of aims, said that these might vary somewhat not only from teacher to teacher, but from institution to institution, but in general the aim should be, broadly speaking, to enable the student to interpret with some degree of intelligence the economic system which prevails, to understand its working, and to approach the problems which arise with a basis of some fundamental understanding. He agreed in substance with Professor Burbank as to the shortcomings of teaching and as to the importance of giving the student an understanding of the fundamental principles—a working understanding. Of course, the average student is interested in economics only from the point of view of practical life, and so in the main, in our text-books, we have divided the field putting the Introductory Principles at the beginning and the Practical Problems at the end; and most of the students are interested in the practical problems, and they take with a certain ill grace the preliminary study of the principles.

Now, it would seem to be possible to hitch up these two, and perhaps to obliterate entirely those distinctions which we have so often drawn between principles and problems, and to consider as a problem something in which we may assume the student is interested, with the idea of emphasizing the significance of the underlying principles. We can show the student that it is hopeless to try to get a practical idea of any problem, whether the tariff, or trade unions, without knowing the principles involved, just as

was the case with the boy John Dump, who started to build a table and then found he had to know something about measurements and other things in connection with what he was vitally interested in. There was thus brought home to him the significance of learning. To bring home the significance of such underlying principles is, perhaps, as far as we ought to go in elementary courses. That means that we shall have to plan a text particularly for our elementary work. Most of our texts are not in every way adaptable, and they must be especially handled, perhaps organized to a syllabus, differing, of course, with the principal problems which present themselves at the different institutions.

As to number of weekly exercises, Professor Agger disagreed with Professor Burbank. He was not in favor of much more than three hours a week. He had a chance in the Columbia Summer School work, where they had one hour each day, to make a little comparison between the two methods. Economics is a subject for which one must take time, but it is not the time one takes in class, but the time one takes for reflection and the processes of digestion, as it were. And it does not pay to observe too much in a given time, but the student must come back to the subject and reflect upon it. The instructor must give him a little time for that.

As to the teacher's attitude, Professor Agger thought that the teacher ought to present his own views, but not in the spirit of a propagandist. Teachers have no right to be propagandists in any sense. The student is to analyze and try to understand, and not till then to pass judgment. We ought to remember very distinctly and emphatically, as we teach these young men and women who come to us, to impress upon them the fact that they are not yet in a position to pass final judgment. They are too prone to do that anyway. Most of them are enthusiastic reformers, and perhaps from that point of view we ought to restrain our enthusiasm for reform, and bring home to the students the importance of understanding a thing before trying to pass judgment upon it. The speaker thought that too many people teach economics who do not get any fun out of teaching, and that a primary qualification of a good teacher of economics is to get a lot of fun from standing before a body of young men and young women and trying to make them understand the subject.

Proper humility before our pupils, showing that we are interested in them and interested from the point of view of having them understand, will help us in our teaching, and let them see that we are enjoying it with them. Finally, the most beautiful work can be done by hitching up for them the class-room discussion with the work of the world, that is, showing to the class the significance of what is going on in the world outside.

Professor Turner, New York University, said that the purpose of the elementary course may differ according to the character of the institution, but its place is that of a "foundation course," or a gateway to more advanced work in the department. He stressed the idea of the interdependence of the subject matter of economics. A principle should never be discussed to the exclusion of other things, he said, because the student gets a distorted notion and is likely to jump to a conclusion.

The speaker's scheme in teaching is to develop coherently the leading related ideas, emphasizing all the while the relationship existing between these. The student comes to see that he cannot reason upon one of the great, burning issues of the time, or safely analyze it, unless he considers

the situation as a whole, a situation of which it is itself a part. In fact, we should develop in the teaching of elementary economics the so-called "sixth sense," namely, the detection of hidden relationships in our economic thought.

After drilling for a considerable period of time in basic theory, Professor Turner said, the students like it. Theoretical discussion is more conducive to activity of mind than the practical problems. It is a dangerous procedure, to be frowned upon by the economists of the country, to introduce the student forthwith to the great practical problems, before he has such a grasp of the principles that he can deal properly with the problems in their "interdependence." To start with practical problems results in failure; exception might be granted if we could have plenty of time, say, two or three years, to start with the problems and gradually draw out a system of thought; but it would be a waste of a century of experience to do that. The practical problems, however, should not be eliminated but should be brought in to illustrate the fundamental principles we are discussing as would be done, for example, in the teaching of physics. Thus principles and practice should go together.

As to the question of the teacher's expression of opinion, Professor Turner said that everybody who successfully conducts a course of elementary economics, whether purposely or not, gives his own ideas to the students all the while. He has a plan in view and he is bound to give his own ideas. It is advantageous for the instructor to take a wrong position—purposely so—and argue for it, and make just as good a case as he can; or to announce, perchance, that he is about to make a mistake, and ask the students to detect him in that mistake; and then call upon some student to give expression to his thoughts and when he has expressed his ideas, have some other student criticize him, and let the discussion go back and forth, often to such an extent that the instructor must check it. He ought to have a class of fifty or sixty, at least, in order to raise the most interesting enthusiasm. If there are but fifteen or twenty students in a class, he does not do it. This discussion back and forth, and the drawing of conclusions before the class is a good thing, for it keeps the class wide awake all the while. If the students come to deem it better for them to have thought wrong than not to have thought at all, and if the teacher guides the discussion to the truth, and to the accomplishment of the purpose for which the course is intended, he will find that the outcome will be very good.

Professor Doten, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, discussing the relation between the teaching of economics and public policy, pointed out that the men active today in business and politics and on the bench are almost a generation away from their training in economics, and consequently we do not see the immediate effect of the training that is being given in our institutions today. One source of the teacher's difficulties is the character of the students that we are getting. The number of students going to college is increasing more than in proportion to the increase in our population. Students are coming more and more from the cities, because our city population is increasing more than the population in general. We are getting in that group of city students boys and girls who are unacquainted with the facts, not only of political life, but particularly of the economic organization of society. The farm boys and the boys from the country

come equipped with a fundamental structure of life, but the boy from the city home comes little equipped with the fundamentals which he can build upon or draw illustrations from. Further, there has grown up a style of teaching and a kind of training in our public schools which will not fit the student, when he comes to college, to make a consistent, thoroughgoing study of any text-book, particularly in our line. In the exact sciences this probably is different, but such training as the student has had in civics, economics, and the like, is more or less "scrappy." He comes up to college with an inability to take a text-book and read and digest it.

The speaker then considered the difficulty of maintaining the interest of students who flock into courses through compulsion. In a great many cases they are disappointed when they get into the course. They realize that this is an age when economic problems are to the front, but they do not bring an interest which is sufficiently deep-seated and sufficiently intelligent to get them interested after they come. We are adopting a general policy which seems to be permeating our whole educational system from the kindergartens up, to amuse our students rather than insist on their getting anything. There is too much time spent in figuring out ways of sugar-coating the pill, and making it easy for them to get these things. They lose a great deal through all our educational work, through reaction from the old idea of the disciplinary value of study.

Professor Doten remarked on the difficulty due, particularly in some institutions, to the students' coming to economics from the study of exact science. They develop very speedily a degree of intolerance for the inexact nature of the subjects we are obliged to teach them, and this bears upon the question whether we shall be dogmatic in our methods of presentation. It is better to be dogmatic, he said. He would rather teach a wrong theory, if he could get it across, and get these fellows to stand it, than to teach them a whole lot of theories about the same thing, in regard to no one of which was he convinced or convincing. The difficulty is that they have come with exact knowledge, and they expect exact knowledge, and when they get this open kind, weighted pro and con,—they question the instructor.

Professor Doten's method is to make copious use of illustrative problems to be solved by the students, and at the end of the first term to give out fifty questions that pretty generally cover the subject as taught, fifty rather searching questions that require a knowledge of practically all the principles involved, and to tell the students that out of these fifty questions he will take five for the final examination.

Finally he thought the device of debates might be used in economics. He would frame up a series of debates on economic questions, and assign debaters to present both sides of a subject in a formal debate, and follow this by a general discussion in class.

At the reconvening of the conference next morning, Professor Bye, Pennsylvania, spoke particularly on three points. First, he stressed a third aim in addition to the two defined in the previous discussion. This third very important aim is to give the social point of view, to cultivate the social standard of ethics on the part of the student. It is not our place to teach radical doctrines or stir up discontent, but the teacher of economics is not doing his duty, or filling the place he should, if he does not make the student see that there is a social significance to economic problems, and that

the thing we ought all to be working for is social welfare rather than individual welfare. The average man or woman who comes to college has a very highly individualistic point of view, and we can not overestimate the necessity of awakening the social conscience.

Secondly, he disagreed with the opinion that, in the case of technical students particularly, economics needs to be presented in a dogmatic way. That he considered a very serious mistake. The average man and woman in this country today is too dogmatic already about economic problems. We ought to show the students the true scientific attitude toward things, and one cannot be a true scientist without soon learning that there are many things about which one cannot be dogmatic. Those students who have been taught the exact sciences most, need most the very opposite sort of training in economics; they must be taught that there are some things about which we must be contented to remain in ignorance until we can gather more facts upon which to base a conclusion. It is a very great mistake to try to give exact knowledge where exact knowledge does not exist. One of the broadest things we can do as educators, in developing the minds of our students of economics, is to teach them to doubt and to hold a lot of problems in their minds for which they do not know the answer, and for which they must not expect to know the answer, but be seekers after truth.

Thirdly, the speaker discussed certain actual methods of teaching inside the class-room. The lecture he considered a mere make-shift, for the student will never get thinking ability by listening to somebody's else thoughts. To spend all the time in small sections is so much better as to outweigh, perhaps, the disadvantage of handling by even young and inexperienced instructors.

The students at the Wharton School, he said, come there for exact business training and are impatient with anything of which they cannot see the immediate value in dollars and cents; and elementary economics they relegate with contempt to the realms of unreality, as a mass of theoretical abstraction. So the instructors there are faced with the problem of making it appear real to them.

The speaker's solution has been to make constant use of newspaper material, in business statistics, in governmental publications, in advertisements, in speeches of business men, from all sorts of sources, and of business statements, such as balance sheets and the like, of firms familiar to the student. The speaker believed that the best way of handling the problem in the class-room is to give the student his text, let him read his theory outside the class-room, so that he will have the general idea in mind, but in the class-room let the instructor make the discussion concrete and practical. Let him never ask the student for definitions, never ask him to state principles, but let him bring into the class-room something about which he can hook up those principles. Thus in analyzing a balance sheet, the student is asked the significance of the different items, is asked to apply these theories to it, and he is asked which items are capital and which are not, and why; and if there is any difference he is asked to justify that difference; and he does that with the concrete material right before his eyes.

So the ideas of value and demand are clarified from advertisements and the papers. And for the equilibrium of demand and supply and the difference between market and normal values, excellent material can be found in the market reports. Similarly, for a statement of the Malthusian law, as

such, the student is never asked, but he is given some facts about the densities of population in different countries, and asked to interpret them. Thus his reading will give him the generalizations and abstract ideas; the class-room will give him the application of these to the phenomena of life. He will learn the principles more thoroughly than he can by any other method; he will see that they are real, and that they are practical. The so-called "case method" does not quite serve, for the student is not sufficiently capable of generalizing from the cases, and valuable as they are for illustrative matter they cannot be made to take the place of a certain text in economics and of the presentation of theory and analysis.

Questioning material in the shape of problems he considered valuable; of the questions in well-known books many are admirable, but many are hypothetical and unreal. They do make the student think through the principles he has been studying, but they do not particularly interest him; and they do not show him the importance and significance of the matter in hand.

In examinations, problems should be set to answer which are not memory tests, and not requests for definitions, but which will force students to apply to a concrete case the information which they have acquired. Examinations, the speaker believed, ought to be oral, and his own are almost entirely of that type.

In the general discussion Professor Rice, Dartmouth, said he had been much impressed by what Professor Bye had added to the statement of aims, but, in view of the difficulty of adequately realizing all aims in a single three-hour course, he raised the question of relative emphasis. Something must be given on the factual side, because of the lack of information which the student has as to facts.

Mr. Hoyt, American Telephone and Telegraph Company, spoke of the desirability of catching economic material both young and old, saying that we should have text-books for the consumption of business men, in a style that business men will read, without sacrificing scientific accuracy. In that case, interest would be passed on to their sons, like the interest in baseball and other things. He then spoke in advocacy of the "case method," which included among its advantages the possibility of removing the student's objection already referred to, that he is working with conflicting materials, and is not arriving at any definite results.

Miss Newell, Wellesley, told of the course in her institution in descriptive economics and sociology which precedes the course in economic principles. Women students, she said, were found to lack the knowledge of economic society, just the obvious objective facts; they did not have that background and it had to be furnished them.

Professor Brown, Smith College, was most unfortunately prevented by the adjournment of the conference Wednesday afternoon from contributing remarks she had prepared with particular reference to the teaching of women students. Her contribution is therefore appended.

My opinions as to the teaching of elementary economics are, of course, based upon my observation of the equipment, habits of thought, and needs of the students whom I have taught. I find that women students as a whole come to their first course in economics with relatively little direct experience of economic relations and institutions. They are consequently eager for information and apt to attribute undue importance to mysterious technical

phrases of business vocabulary. Likewise, having little knowledge by which to test them, they tend to accept the generalizations of economic theory quite uncritically, save as they conflict with the popular proverbs of street and press equally uncritically accepted, and to pigeonhole economic problems, each with its particular cause and cure. With few exceptions, their acquaintance with the market is limited to the retail store and their conception of it, that of the consumer. A considerable percentage of them will continue, after graduation, to be primarily consumers and directors of consumption as far as their explicit economic relations are concerned. At the same time, with the acquisition of political power and the leisure to exercise it, they will have more and more occasion for the consideration of public problems involving a variety of economic interests.

In view of these observations, I feel that the elementary course in economics should attempt primarily to develop in these students critical thinking along economic lines and some understanding of the individual's complex relations to economic processes and their control, with full consideration of the importance of consumption in the regulation and direction of production. I find it helpful toward these ends:—to encourage as wide descriptive reading as possible, and to point out various opportunities for immediate contact with industrial and commercial facts and conditions during vacation periods as well as the college term; to direct attention continually to the sources of facts and statistics as bearing on their validity; to discourage the use of abstract terms without evidence of complete understanding of their content; to insist upon clear and logical reasoning rather than any certain conclusions; and to emphasize the evolutionary and interdependent character of economic problems. In recognition of the students' own equipment, it seems reasonable to start the study of price with the retail shop, examining the complications which arise there as integral parts of the laws of price rather than exceptions to them.

As to method, the point of view here outlined demands the use of varied readings in addition to or in place of a single text, the integration rather than separation of principles and problems, the teaching of classes in small groups of not more than twenty-five students, with only occasional use of the formal lecture as an aid to the organization of material or an opportunity for the stimulus sometimes afforded by outside speakers. I see no way of developing thinking ability and a truth-respecting attitude of mind except by requiring students to think and express their thoughts under criticism.